Make or break social marketing

Rita Zamora explains how to thrive in a digital ‘word of mouth’ world

Word of mouth has forever changed. It used to be that a friend would recommend your practice to another friend, and you’d likely receive a new patient referral. Today, with the internet at our fingertips, potential patients have evolved to become voracious researchers. This appetite for volumes of information before making purchase decisions has made it more important than ever for you to change the way you’re marketed—both on and offline.

Patients researching a dentist will not only expect you to have a website, they will also want to see what other information is available about you. In fact, they may even want to know what their friends, and the friends of their friends, also think of you. Consider for a moment how important ratings and details have become in the book and travel markets. People not only want to see photos of the hotel they are considering, they may also want to see video, comments from recent travelers, and they may search out several other sites to compare information.

This high level of research is not only being done by those “seeking out the best deal!”, MarketTools recently revealed a study indicating affluent visitors (with annual incomes of more than $75K) are most likely to research products online before buying (45 per cent). While the power of personal testimonials and word of mouth will live on, consumers now want to view as much information as possible before making decisions about buying everything from hotel rooms to healthcare.

Now is an ideal time to consider whether your website needs remodelling. Does your website represent your practice and your brand? Does your website appear properly on mobile devices? In a recent study by Tecmark, almost 15 per cent of UK web traffic is of mobile origin. Mobile internet usage continues to skyrocket. It’s vital your website be positioned well for this growing market. Imagine someone referring their friend to your practice during a conversation at a coffee shop. Their friend pulls out their smartphone to Google you on the spot... If your website isn’t findable, functional or viewable, your inability to be researched may hurt your chances of gaining a new patient.

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Remember that upon referral, potential new patients want to be able to find you easily. They may also want to know what to expect when they see you, sit in your dental chair, receive treatment, or settle their bill. Imagine someone referring their friend to your practice during a conversation at a coffee shop. Their friend pulls out their smartphone to Google you on the spot... If your website isn’t findable, functional or viewable, your inability to be researched may hurt your chances of gaining a new patient.

Remember that upon referral, potential new patients want to be able to find you easily. They may also want to know what to expect when they see you, sit in your dental chair, receive treatment, or settle their bill. With that said, it is important for you to have a good website, plenty of photos, and video with the latest of what to expect in your practice... In addition,
be sure you have reviews/testimonials in a variety of online locations (again, to make yourself easily found in Google search).

Most importantly, if you aren’t already on board, research what you need to get your practice on Facebook. The Facebook platform has replaced ambient noise, which used to be filled by television or radio in many homes. Often users of the enormously popular social network will have Facebook open and readily available throughout the day on their computer or their phone. It has already become a great source of testimonials and powerful, amplified word of mouth for many practices.

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With that said, understand that without proper systems in place (primarily word of mouth in your office) your Facebook efforts may fail. Social marketing is not a “build it and they will come” tactic. For example, a traditional magazine advert required you to build your ad, pay for it and then sit and wait for it to work. Social media marketing requires ongoing effort—like maintaining a garden. You’ll always need to tend to it or it will die.

Practices well versed in referral marketing strategies, those who understand what it takes to make traditional word of mouth succeed, will likely find Facebook a remarkable opportunity. On the other hand, those practices looking for fast fixes, immediate floods of new patients, or those who practice on-and-off “when we have time” marketing will be quickly disappointed in social marketing.

It’s happening already. Check out Facebook, and you’ll find dozens of abandoned dental practice pages. Pages were created, and for whatever reason were left ignored. Most commonly I hear, “We just don’t have time”, “We don’t know what to say”, “If it didn’t work”, etc. Here are a few successful traditional word of mouth marketing elements that will also help you sustain your social media efforts.

- Have a plan in place: Identify your goals and objectives
- Communicate well
- Be sociable, friendly and personable (yet you don’t have to abandon privacy)
- Be yourself—authenticity is in
- Make one specific person in your office responsible for regularly maintaining and monitoring your efforts (it helps if they are people oriented, motivated—and for social media, have good web 2.0 skills)
- Be patient

Social marketing efforts will build results for the long term. As with referral and traditional word of mouth marketing, your returns will reflect the effort you invest. Consider the theory of inviting referrals and the same applies to asking patients to “like” you on Facebook. Talk to your patients, make yourself easily found in Google, and ensure your web presence portrays you properly. Place your focus on building quality relationships in highly visible online communities and you are sure to succeed in today’s digital word of mouth world.

About the author
Rita Zamora is an international social media marketing consultant and speaker. She and her team actively co-manage dozens of dental practices’ social media programs. Her clients are located across the United States and internationally. She has been published in many professional publications. Rita is also Honorary Vice President to the British Dental Practice Managers Association. Learn more at www.DentalRelationshipMarketing.com or email rita@rita-zamora.com.